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Restorer of Iowa Palimpsests

Bertha MH Shambaugh

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Restorer of Iowa Palimpsests

Lo, "a great prophet is risen up among us" who writes of folks — just Iowa folks! Herbert Quick, middle-aged and in the fullness of experience, has, in *Vandemark's Folly* and *The Hawkeye*, sent forth a message unto all the people, teaching them that the record of the generations of Iowa pioneers and frontiersmen who trailed their way over the Old Ridge Road to the Fort Dodge country and who erected the first shelters, scored the wonderful prairie sod, established townships, organized county government, and thus "set a-going" the society of the Commonwealth of Iowa, furnishes all the materials of great literature and every element of great art.

An artist and a scholar as well as a prophet and a teacher, Herbert Quick has with conscientious precision and with keen appreciation of their worth and dignity reconstructed and restored for us some of the palimpsest records of early Iowa — already

grown dim with the erasures of time and covered with the dust of decades.

Herbert Quick lays no claim to the title of historian or restorer of palimpsests, but modestly speaks of himself as "sitting in the wagon of history with my feet dangling down and facing the rear." And yet it is clear that he knows the road, and knows the people who have developed the country through which it winds from "things as raw and primitive as King Arthur's time" to a "region now as completely developed as England"—and all within the memory of men still living! He sees in this record a great achievement, and declares that "there never was such a thing in all the history of the world before."

The author himself and his two great books are at once the witness and the evidence of the beginning of things in Iowa—"the old, sweet, grand, beautiful things, the things which never can be again." Born in what he calls "the Ancient Greek period of mid-western life, when communities were set out as our farmers planted trees, by thrusting the twigs of cottonwood or willow or Lombardy poplar into the soil" where they were expected to grow, Herbert Quick remembers and understands the part played in the great drama of Iowa both by the generation of *Vandemark's Folly* who came "voluntarily" and by the generation of *The Hawkeye* who were "injected" into the body politic and "never saw anything else save the frontier, but who had spirits and

souls inherited from people who lived in the established societies of the East and of the South and of the Old World."

With masterful pen, with singular beauty of diction, often with epic rhythm and march, and again in the picturesque language of the period (for styles in speech, even in Iowa, come and go like the paper collar and the made-up bow tie), Herbert Quick restores the records of life in early Iowa with all the skill and fidelity of the classical scholar who reconstructs the original writings on old parchments by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts. And so we hail him as a restorer of Iowa palimpsests.

In *Vandemark's Folly* is reconstructed the glowing, throbbing story of the journey from the Dubuque Ferry, the gateway to the Land of Promise, over the Old Ridge Road, across the great green sea of the Iowa prairie—which was "the newest, strangest, most delightful, sternest, most wonderful thing in the world"—to "that holy wedlock which binds the farmer to the soil he tills." Then follows a faithful restoration of the record of that great experiment on the Iowa prairie of "building a democracy based on ponderous production" and of "keeping a people economically free while living an industrial and agricultural life and dependent on highways made by man instead of those created by nature."

Here in *Vandemark's Folly* is restored for all time the palimpsest of the prairie fire — the fire that came up from the west like a roaring tornado advancing in separate lines and columns and detachments like a burning army. One could see “the flames leap up, reach over, catch in front of the line, kindle a new fire, and again be overleaped by a new tongue of fire, so that the whole line became a belt of flames, and appeared to be rolling along in a huge billow of fire Sometimes a whole mile or so of the line disappeared as the fire burned down into lower ground; and then with a swirl of flame and smoke, the smoke luminous in the glare, it moved magnificently up into sight, rolling like a breaker of fire bursting on a reef of land, buried the hillside in flame, and then whirled on over the top, its streamers flapping against the horizon, snapping off shreds of flame into the air, as triumphantly as a human army taking an enemy fort!”

Here, too, in the same book is found a vivid record of the raging, howling, shrieking frontier blizzard, “the breath of which came with a roar and struck with a shiver”—but which can never come again for “every object that civilization and development have placed in the way of the wind prevents it.” Here is revealed one of the dangers in the life of the pioneer who, lost in two miles of snow between himself and the sun, plunges headlong into the drifts, flounders through them, and finally “cuffed and mauled by the storm” stumbles into a straw stack —

and safety — or sinks into the soft snow and is buried — a victim of the storm.

Is it possible for a people of a later day and a friendlier clime to comprehend the terrors of those winter storms of early Iowa? Herbert Quick's answer is contained in the pages of *Vandemark's Folly*:

"Then the snow, once lifted on the wings of the blast, became a part of the air, and remained in it. The atmosphere for hundreds of feet, for thousands of feet from the grassy surface of the prairie, was a moving cloud of snow, which fell only as the very tempest itself became over-burdened with it. As the storm continued, it always grew cold; for it was the North emptying itself into the South. . . .

"As the tumult grows hills are leveled, and hollows rise into hills. Every shed-roof is the edge of an oblique Niagara of snow; every angle the center of a whirlpool. If you are caught out in it, the Spirit of the Storm flies at you and loads your eyebrows and eyelashes and hair and beard with icicles and snow. As you look out into the white, the light through your bloodshot eyelids turns everything to crimson. Your feet lag, as the feathery whiteness comes almost to your knees. Your breath comes choked as with water. If you are out far away from shelter, God help you! You struggle along for a time, all the while fearing to believe that the storm which did not seem so very dangerous, is growing more violent, and that the daylight, which you thought would last

for hours yet, seems to be fading, and that night appears to be setting in earlier than usual. . . .

“You can not tell, when you try to look about you, what is sky and what is earth; for all is storm. You feel more and more tired. All at once, you find that the wind which was at your side a while ago, as you kept beating into it on your course toward help and shelter, is now at your back. Has the wind changed? No; it will blow for hours from the same quarter — perhaps for days! No; you have changed your course, and are beating off with the storm! This will never do: you rally, and again turn your cheek to the cutting blast: but you know that you are off your path; yet you wonder if you may not be going right — if the wind *has* changed; or if you have not turned to the left when you should have gone to the right.

“Loneliness, anxiety, weariness, uncertainty. An awful sense of helplessness takes possession of you. If it were daylight, you could pass around the deep drifts, even in this chaos; but now a drift looks the same as the prairie grass swept bare. You plunge headlong into it, flounder through it, creeping on hands and knees, with your face sometimes buried in the snow, get on your feet again, and struggle on.

“You know that the snow, finer than flour, is beating through your clothing. You are chilled, and shiver. Sometimes you stop for a while and with your hands over your eyes stand stooped with your back to the wind. You try to stamp your feet to

warm them, but the snow, soft and yielding, forbids this. You are so tired that you stop to rest in the midst of a great drift — you turn your face from the driving storm and wait. It seems so much easier than stumbling wearily on. Then comes the inrushing consciousness that to rest thus is to die. You rush on in a frenzy. You have long since ceased to think of what is your proper course,— you only know that you must struggle on. You attempt a shout; — ah, it seems so faint and distant even to yourself! No one else could hear it a rod in this raging, howling, shrieking storm, in which awful sounds come out of the air itself, and not alone from the things against which it beats. And there is no one else to hear.

“You gaze about with snow-smitten eyeballs for some possible light from a friendly window. Why, the sun itself could not pierce this moving earth-cloud of snow! Your feet are not so cold as they were. You can not feel them as you walk. You come to a hollow filled with soft snow. Perhaps there is the bed of a stream deep down below. You plunge into this hollow, and as you fall, turn your face from the storm. A strange and delicious sense of warmth and drowsiness steals over you; you sink lower, and feel the cold soft whiteness sifting over neck and cheek and forehead: but you do not care. The struggle is over; and—in the morning the sun glints coldly over a new landscape of gently undulating alabaster. Yonder is a little hillock which

marks the place where the blizzard overtook its prey. Sometime, when the warm March winds have thawed the snow, some gaunt wolf will snuff about this spot, and send up the long howl that calls the pack to the banquet."

Vandemark's Folly and *The Hawkeye* literally bulge with palimpsests of pioneer and frontier life in Iowa. Here are the records of the beginnings of political and social organization; of tragedies and comedies in that "strange drama we call self government;" of neighborhood meetings and blacksmith shop conferences where "the first prairie generation, bred of a line of foresters," solved their growing problems just as had the New England farmers on the Massachusetts frontier; of county politics in a later day with the "court house ring" in control and waxing fat on contracts for bridges that never were built and roads that were never improved.

There in *Vandemark's Folly* are reconstructed the parties and festivals of 1854 where the "John Aldens, the Priscillas, the Miles Standishes and the Dorothy Q's" of the frontier assembled in tight fitting corduroys and newly greased boots, in alpaca, delaines, figured lawns and calicoes, and "set a-going as great a society as the Pilgrim Fathers and Pilgrim Mothers: the society of the great commonwealth of Iowa." And here in *The Hawkeye* are the fashions that "made Beauty seductive in 1874"—hats which were "little affairs, brimless, not half large enough to cover their heads," and

dresses with skirts sweeping the grass and with bustles, basques, and polonaises.

Like old albums these books reveal types of the "leading citizens" in the frontier communities. Here, for example, is the real-estate dealer in his buckboard buggy measuring off the land by the revolving buggy wheel, extolling its virtues as he went, "no stumps, no stones, just the right amount of rainfall — the garden spot of the West . . . without a shadow of doubt the permanent county seat of the best county in Iowa, and that means the best in the known world!"

Here is the frontier doctor who lives above his own drug store, and who when called hurries down the stairs, sets his cases down on the sidewalk while he runs his buggy out of the shed and hitches up his horses, and then dashes off into the night, sometimes in time, sometimes too late to assist the "Mrs. Williams" or the "Mrs. Absalom Frosts" to usher into the world a future citizen of the Commonwealth of Iowa. Here is the pioneer preacher "laboring with his text, speaking in a halting manner, and once in a while bogging down in a dead stop out of which he could not pull himself without giving a sort of honk like a wild goose."

Here is the first lawyer, just out from Indiana by way of the Ohio and Mississippi, with his "long frock coat originally black, a white shirt, and a black cravat", with "his carpet bag and his law library", which, because "books are damned heavy" and law

books particularly so, consisted of *Blackstone's Commentaries*, *Chitty on Pleading*, the *Code of Iowa of 1851*, and "the *Session Laws* of the state so far as it had any session laws."

And here is the pioneer editor, "thick as thieves" with the county ring "as long as he had the county printing", whose "scurrilous paper" most people said "was never fit to enter a decent home, but which they always subscribed for and read as quick as it came!" Here is the story of love and courtship in the Neolithic period of Iowa culture when it was the accepted order "to git married early and stay married."

Such are the records of *Vandemark's Folly* and of *The Hawkeye*. In the pages of these books there is no attempt to glorify the extra legal methods sometimes resorted to in solving the perplexities and difficulties of frontier life, or to speak lightly of the hardships on the Iowa farm in the day of "bleak wastes, robber bands, and savage primitiveness;" there is no effort to minimize the perspiring job of the thrasher or the lame back and bleeding hands of the corn husker in a later day when the frontiersman "compromised on a half section" in "the Iowa style"; there is no ignoring the nightmare of the Iowa prairie farmer when "the prospect of money for the mortgage and the doctor's bill and the account at the store" was destroyed by the "rusting" of the wheat, or the sorrow of the Kate McConkeys who gave up their currant bushes and peonies to

try again as "Leaseholders"; there is no glossing over the old political party "way wise and broke nice", the "machine" scheming for the domination of the city which was to be, or the days of "easy money" for the "court-house ring" and the "regulars". And yet in the telling of these things by Herbert Quick there is none of the bitterness which is so often found in the tales of Hamlin Garland dealing with the people and lands to the east and west of the Iowa country; nor is there here any of that sneering cynicism with which Sinclair Lewis a generation later portrays life in the wheat country to the north. And because of the absence of the bitterness and the sneer *Vandemark's Folly* and *The Hawkeye* are nearer the truth and will live longer.

There is nothing finer in all the rapidly accumulating literature of mid-western America than Herbert Quick's tribute to the mothers of the frontiers in *The Hawkeye*:

"The mothers of the frontiers! They felt the oncoming of another day for their children. No life was so laborious, no situation so unpropitious, no poverty so deep that they did not through a divine gift of prophecy see beyond the gloom a better day for their children. In the smoky overheated kitchens, struggling to feed the 'gangs' of harvesters and thrashers, as they washed and mopped and baked and brewed and spun and wove and knit and boiled soap and mended and cut and basted and sewed and

strained milk and skimmed cream and churned and worked over butter, catching now and then an opportunity to read while rocking a child to sleep, drinking in once in a while a bit of poetry from the sky or the cloud or the flower; they were haloed like suns of progress for their families and for their nation, as they worked and planned and assumed for themselves a higher and higher culture of its sort — all for their children. We build monuments in the public square for the soldiers of our wars; but where is the monument for the Kate McConkeys who made possible so much of the good which is represented by the public square itself? Unless it is a monument not made with hands, in our hearts and souls, none can ever exist which can be in any way adequate."

Whether the characters and the episodes in *Vandemark's Folly* and in *The Hawkeye* are drawn from actual history or from imagination, whether the names are real or fictitious, matters not. Faithfully, conscientiously, and understandingly the author has used them with a marvelous wealth of detail to tell of the beginnings of a great Commonwealth, and his work must be regarded as a very real contribution to the literature of Iowa history. For these books tell the truth — "not the truth of statistics, not just information, but the living truth" about Iowa folks. They are great books! So broad in their human sympathies, so deep in their penetration of life's realities that they belong to a literature that is universal.

Something of the author's own experience and background for the writing of these books may be gleaned from *The Hawkeye* in the story of Fremont McConkey — the country boy whom Herbert Quick knew the best of all — the boy of the early Iowa farm with the poet's soul longing for self expression. Fed on a diet of "warmed-over English literature, which Americans who should have known better laid before him", and "taught by every one in speech and printed page that he is outside the realm of 'material' for literature", he dreamed of a day when he might know first-hand something of "Scottish moors" and "ruined abbeys", and of the wonderful world of "Dashing Charlie" and other glorious heroes with which the writers of the *New York Weekly* seemed so familiar.

Steeped in the beauty and wonder of the prairie, and with flashes of realization of the dramatic elements in the shifting, stirring episodes of its rapid transformation, Fremont McConkey had the growing conviction that he could write, if — *if*. But who would want to read about Iowa? If this were only a mountain country, or a stern and rock-bound coast, one might make a story of it! If it were only a land of clashing shields, or at least a place where judges wore robes! But what was there in Iowa or in the lives of Iowa people for a writer? Could romance be found on the prairies, in humble country homes, in fields of wheat and corn, in small towns, in township caucuses, or in county court-houses?

With an understanding heart and with the authority of one who has received the acclaims of popular favor as well as the approval of the critics, Herbert Quick answers the Fremont McConkeys — the dreamers and poets of Iowa with “the divine fire in their souls.” I KNOW THAT IF THE ARTIST BORN IN IOWA COULD ONLY BE ALLOWED SUCH A LIFE OF THE SOUL AS WOULD IMPEL HIM TO RESPECT HIS IOWA MATERIALS, AND TO PONDER THEM LONG ENOUGH AND DEEPLY ENOUGH, EVERY ELEMENT OF GREAT ART WOULD BE FOUND HERE.

In *Vandemark's Folly* Uncle Jacob Vandemark calls his story the “History of Vandemark Township”; and in *The Hawkeye* Fremont McConkey tells us that his story is “The History of Monterey County.” There are ninety-nine counties in Iowa and some sixteen hundred townships! What a field for the restorers of palimpsests and the writers of history! What a field for the “Gertrudes” who “went East to Vassar and joined the Daughters of the American Revolution!” What a field for the “Paul Holbrooks” just back from the State University with ideals of public service “and against the County Ring!” What a field for the schools and colleges! What a field for poets and dreamers!

Herbert Quick, prophet and restorer of Iowa palimpsests, has pointed the way!

BERTHA M. H. SHAMBAUGH